
ON-SCREEN DISCOURSE ON TERRORISM: HOLLYWOOD REPRESENTATION OF ARABS AND MUSLIMS PRE- AND POST-9/11 ATTACKS

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of the current study is to shed light on Hollywood representation of Arabs and Muslims in terrorist discourse. It seeks to answer, especially, three main questions: How does Hollywood discourse depict Arabs and Muslims pre and post 9/11? What is the ideological stance of Western politics towards them? Did pre 9/11 discourse predict 9/11 event? To answer these questions, we have formulated three main hypotheses. The first states that Hollywood discourse depicts Arabs and Muslims in both pre and post 9/11 in a negative way. The second states that western politics considers them as radical terrorists. The third states that pre- 9/11 discourse has predicted terrorist attacks against U.S. territory. To analyse on-screen discourse, we have adopted Van Dijk's model of Ideological Discourse Analysis. The chosen data consider two films before and after 9/11. The analysis of on-screen discourse reveals that all hypotheses are confirmed.

KEYWORDS: Arabs and Muslims, 9/11 Event, On-Screen discourse, Terrorism, Ideology.

ملخص: تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تسليط الضوء على تمثيل هوليوود للعرب والمسلمين في الخطاب الإرهابي. وتسعى للإجابة، على وجه الخصوص، على ثلاثة أسئلة رئيسية: كيف يصور خطاب هوليوود العرب والمسلمين قبل وبعد أحداث 11 سبتمبر؟ ما هو الموقف الأيديولوجي للسياسة الغربية تجاههم؟ هل تنبأ خطاب ما قبل 11 سبتمبر بأحداث 11

سبتمبر؟ للإجابة على هذه الأسئلة، قمنا بصياغة ثلاث فرضيات رئيسية. الأولى تنص على أن خطاب هوليوود يصور العرب والمسلمين ما قبل 11 سبتمبر وما بعده بطريقة سلبية. الثانية تنص على أن السياسة الغربية تعتبرهم إرهابيين متطرفين. أما الفرضية الثالثة فتنص على أن خطاب ما قبل الحادي عشر من سبتمبر تنبأ بهجمات إرهابية ضد الأراضي الأمريكية. لتحليل الخطاب المتلفز، اعتمدنا نموذج فان ديك لتحليل الخطاب الأيديولوجي ووقع الاختيار على فيلمين قبل وبعد 9/11. أسفر تحليل الخطاب المتلفز عن تأكيد جميع الفرضيات.

كلمات دالة : العرب و المسلمين، أحداث 11 سبتمبر، الخطاب المتلفز، الارهاب، الايديولوجيا.

1. Introduction

Revealing a given ideological stance against a certain ‘Other’ can take place in different forms: Words, gestures, actions, decisions, etc. Just like any other discourse, Hollywood discourse passes an ideological stance against terrorists. Perhaps what characterizes Hollywood discourse on terrorism is the stereotyped image of who the terrorist are and why they are doing so. A great part of literature has addressed these questions including books, theses, articles, news reports, etc. In all these works, the representation of Arabs and Muslims is a fundamental issue. Most of these works, if not all of them, have agreed that Hollywood discourse on terrorism have assigned terrorism to Arabs and Muslims only, preventing as such any other speculations about non-Arab or non-Muslim terrorists. More importantly, the ‘Self’ i.e., Americans, is always the good side; the one who settles peace, spreads culture and civilization, and protects the weak from the brutal, heartless Arab and Muslim.

2. Literature Review

Navy Seals (Teague, 1990) tells the story of a group of Navy SEALs who go to the Middle East to free a helicopter crew taken captive by a radical terrorist Ben Shaheed (Nicholas Kadi) and his

group. While they were there, the navy seals discover that these terrorists possess missiles which are supposed to be used against U.S. The navy seals led by Lt. James Curran (Michael Biehn) and Lt. Dale Hawkins (Charlie Sheen) have collaborated with a reporter 'Joanne Whalley (Claire Varrens)' who was an expert on Ben Shaheed's motives and strategies, to foil Shaheed's terrorist plot and destroy the weapons.

United 93 (Greengrass, 2006) was produced after 9/11 event and talked about it. This film was based on true events that took place the day of terrorist attacks. Characters who participated in this movie had the names of the victims who were innocent passengers on an airplane, United 93. In a series of terrorist attacks against U.S., this airplane and three other ones, were hijacked by a group of Arab/Muslim terrorists and directed to destroy sensitive sites (The World Trade Center and the Pentagon) in U.S. Terrorists have already succeeded to hit three airplanes to The World Trade Center. The passengers of United 93 knew the plan of terrorists and decided to do something to prevent them; and instead of hitting another building, the airplane has fallen in a field.

A great part of literature has discussed and criticized the stereotyped image of Arabs and Muslims as radical terrorists driven by a religious ideology 'Islam'. At the top of these works comes Shaheen's (2001, 2003) *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Shaheen claimed that "Arabs are the most maligned group in the history of Hollywood" (2001, p. 14). He has supported his claim referring to the fact that more than 900 Hollywood films have portrayed Arabs in a very negative way: brutal, ignorant, ugly, uncivilized, etc. Other important studies include Reid's (2013) *Discourse of Film Terrorism: Hollywood representations of Arab Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, 1991-2011*, Woods' (2019) *Adventure, Intrigue, and Terror: Arabs and the Middle East in Hollywood Film Music*, Roumie's (2004) *Arab Stereotypes in American Cinema Over the Twentieth Century*, and many other works that shed light on Anti-Arab/Muslim racism in Hollywood discourse.

Being defined as one of these studies, this study seeks to answer three main questions: How does Hollywood discourse depict Arabs and Muslims pre and post 9/11 event? What is the ideological stance of Western politics towards them? Did pre 9/11 discourse predict 9/11 event? To answer these questions, we have formulated three main hypotheses. The first states that Hollywood discourse depicts Arabs and Muslims in both pre and post 9/11 in a stereotyped pejorative way. The second states that the Western politics considers them as radical terrorists who must be stopped by force. The third states that pre- 9/11 discourse has predicted terrorist attacks against U.S. territory. The data chosen includes two films before and after 9/11. This includes *Navy Seals* (Teague, 1990) and *United 93* (Greengrass, 2006). To analyse on-screen discourse, we have adopted van Dijk's model of Ideological Discourse Analysis that would enable us to uncover ideological bias in favour of a 'Self' (Westerners) against an 'Other' (Arabs and Muslims) in Hollywood discourse.

3. Methodology

As mentioned above, we have opted for van Dijk's model of Ideological Discourse Analysis that is contextualized within critical discourse studies. The main aim of CDA is to investigate the often implicit relationship of causality and determination between discursive practices and social and cultural structures (Fairclough, 2013). In other words, the task of CD analysts is to address social wrongs (Fairclough, 2013) via making explicit social actors' ideological bias (van Dijk, 2011, 2014; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In his model, van Dijk proposes a list of categories the presence of which reveals the existence of a certain ideology against a certain 'Otherness'. Van Dijk's theory is based on the assumption that people are grouped within different ideological groups which exist in opposition and struggle for "social goods" (1998). In other words, the 'Self' is always depicted as positive, while the other is depicted in a negative way. Trying to legitimate a positive 'Self', the members of a given ideological group resort to different strategies displayed in different discourse structures, meanings, actions, etc. Meanwhile, the

‘Other’ is delegitimated, whether explicitly or implicitly, by the same strategies.

Although van Dijk has addressed political ideologies, he has claimed that ideological categories can also refer to other types of ideologies: religious, professional, gender, etc. Also, the list of these categories is not limited as there is always a possibility to come across new categories that trace the line between the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’. In the context of the current study, we are going to check the existence of these categories or other ones in *Navy Seals* (Teague, 1990) and *United 93* (Greengrass, 2006). Potential Self and Other are represented by ‘Westerners’ and ‘Arabs and Muslims’ respectively. Throughout the analysis of on-screen discourse, we will examine how the Other is represented in Hollywood discourse on terrorism. We will also check whether Arabs and Muslims are depicted as radical terrorists who must be fought. Our analysis of pre 9/11 discourse would also examine whether this discourse has predicted terrorist attacks against U.S.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Ideological Categories in Navy Seals and United 93

The analysis of on-screen has revealed the existence of the following ideological categories:

ACTOR DESCRIPTION (MEANING)

In both pre- and post- 9/11 on-screen discourse; actors are mainly described as members of two major groups: Terrorists and anti-terrorist heroes. Terrorists are always Arabs and Muslims who live in the Middle East and dress in a non-stylish way. In *Navy Seals* (Teague, 1990), and as opposed to a developed West, Beirut is depicted as a war zone where plenty of terrorists find a rescue to make plots to imbalance the world peace. They are described as brutal and uncivilized people who, driven by their religion, carry too much hatred for Westerners. Westerners, for their part, are depicted as Classy, elegant, and kind. They are meant to be the heroes who

sacrifice their lives to protect the world against terrorism. Especially in United 93 (Greengrass, 2006), Westerners are also depicted as victims who cannot live in peace in their own homeland.

AUTHORITY (ARGUMENTATION)

In both films, Islam is represented as a motive authority that calls for violence against non-believers, whereas Christianity is represented as a motive authority that calls for settling peace in the world. Also, the image of a U.S. political leadership of the world is communicated in different scenes and throughout different actions and decisions. This authoritative image was meant to legitimate all decisions made by U.S. against Arabs and Muslims.

CATEGORIZATION (MEANING)

Actors are categorized into: Westerners and Arabs/Muslims. Arabs and Muslims are represented in a negative image. They represent the group of the bad guys. However, Westerners represent the group of the good ones.

COMPARISON (MEANING, ARGUMENTATION)

Comparison entails comparing the Self (Westerners) to the Other (Arabs/Muslims) in terms of physical appearance, character, jobs, lifestyles, principles, commitment, etc. This comparison helps enlarge the gap between the opposing groups.

CONSENSUS (POLITICAL STRATEGY)

Consensus refers to the claim that fighting terrorists (Arabs and Muslims) is a legitimated decision made in order to protect U.S. (the West) and other parts of the world. In other words, exerting power against Arabs/Muslims is depicted as an agreed-upon decision meant to protect potential victims.

DISTANCING (MEANING, LEXICON)

US-THEM polarization is expressed by expressions that claim for the existence of a large distance between Self and Other. In other words, on-screen discourse claims that Westerners, as opposed to Arabs/Muslims, belong to a supreme race which is meant to lead and protect the world. Distancing is expressed by the use of: We vs They, Us vs Them, Here vs There, etc. Distancing is also represented by using negative adjectives and pronouns instead of naming Arabs and Muslims. However, Westerners have the lion-share in on-screen discourse i.e., their names, families, deeds, relationships, etc. are sufficiently described.

DRAMATIZATION (RHETORIC)

Dramatization refers to exaggerating the facts in one's favour. In the context of these films, Arabs and Muslims represent a real threat to U.S. citizens. Numbers of those who have been killed, their families and children, kill and destruction scenes of 9/11, etc. are all mimicked in United 93 (Greengrass, 2006).

EUPHEMISM (RHETORIC; MEANING)

It is a semantic move of mitigation that plays an important role while talking about the Other (Arabs and Muslims). It is meant to avoid a negative impression formation about US (Westerners). In Navy Seals (Teague, 1990), for instance, negative opinions about Arabs and Muslims are mitigated through giving a space of freedom to terrorists to express their radical views on TV. Also, having a romantic relationship with a half-Lebanese reporter 'Joanne Whalley (Claire Varrens)', the West propagates a positive image of a tolerant, welcoming and open-minded Self.

EVIDENTIALITY (MEANING, ARGUMENTATION)

Westerners present some evidence or proof for their bad actions against Arabs and Muslims. In Navy Seals (Teague, 1990) and especially United 93 (Greengrass, 2006) which was based on true

events, the Middle East is referred to as a war zone in which terrorist cells grow and develop massive weapons that terrorize the world. Again, it is another strategy that is meant to legitimate acting against Arabs and Muslims all over the world.

EXAMPLE/ILLUSTRATION (ARGUMENTATION)

To support the claim for a positive Self (Westerners) and a negative Other (Arabs and Muslims), the ideological category of ‘example’/‘illustration’ (argumentation) is also used and entails giving concrete examples of what happened in the Middle East (Beirut in Navy Seals) and U.S. (New York City in United 93); referring to the victims of terrorism inside and outside U.S. territory.

EXPLANATION (MEANING, ARGUMENTATION)

Van Dijk (2000, p. 70) stated that “social psychology uses the notion “Ultimate Attribution Error,” according to which negative acts of ingroup members tend to be explained (away), whereas the negative acts of outgroup members tend to be explained in terms of inherent properties of such actors (e.g., because they are unreliable or criminal)”. In the context of these films, negative acts of Arabs and Muslims, terrorism for instance, are explained in terms of inherent properties i.e., all Arabs are terrorists.

FALLACIES (ARGUMENTATION)

On-screen discourse includes many fallacies meant to legitimate actions against Arabs and Muslims. First, all terrorists are Arabs/Muslims carrying names like: Ahmed, Mohamed, Ali, etc. Second, U.S. is the principal peacekeeper in the world that sacrifices its soldiers to protect other people. Third, people in the host countries (Beirut in Navy Seals); victims of extreme systems, appreciate American presence and help. For instance, in Navy Seals (Teague, 1990), an anti-terrorist boy helped American navy seals to find and destroy the weapons.

GENERALIZATION (MEANING, ARGUMENTATION)

Another important discursive practice is that of generalization “in which concrete events or actions are generalized and possibly abstracted from, thus making the claim broader, while more generally applicable” (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 71). In the context of this study, terrorist attacks are not considered as actions of individual terrorists, but are exclusively attributed to Arabs and Muslims. In other words, a terrorist is always an Arab/Muslim; a terrorist cannot be a western guy.

HISTORY AS LESSON (TOPOS)

This category states that “the present situation can be relevantly compared to earlier (positive or negative) events in history” (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 72). After 9/11 attacks, on-screen discourse refers to this event as a lesson of history. Especially, in Navy Seals (Teague, 1990) that mimicked the event, the ultimate aim of the anti-terrorist group is to prevent the same tragedy to happen again.

HUMANITARIANISM (TOPOS, MACROSTRATEGY)

Humanitarianism refers to the defense of human rights. Westerners pretend to interfere in the Middle East and other sites to defend people's rights.

HYPERBOLE (RHETORIC)

“hyperboles are semantic rhetorical devices for the enhancement of meaning [...] bad actions or properties of the Others are expressed in hyperbolic terms (our bad actions in mitigated terms), and vice versa” (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 73). Bad actions of ‘Arabs and Muslims’ are described as terrorism. Whereas, bad actions of ‘Westerners’ are described as Self-defence and peace-keeping procedures.

INTERACTION AND CONTEXT

Not only at the level of words and actions that Arabs and Muslims

are being negatively described and treated. Even at the level of interaction, Arabs and Muslims are underestimated and looked down. In both films, Arabs are described as inferior to their counter-part (westerners). In *Navy Seals* (Teague, 1990), American navy seals are described as courageous and powerful while Arabs/Muslims are described as coward. In one of the scenes, Ben Shaheed, the chief of terrorists, has pretended to be an Egyptian sailor captured by terrorists to escape being killed by American soldiers. Also, in *United 93*, the civilian passengers have shown courage and patriotism in fighting a band of coward terrorists who had no faith in what they were doing.

LEGALITY (ARGUMENTATION)

On-screen discourse describes military involvement in the Middle East as an escapable fate meant to rescue oppressed people and settle peace in a war zone. In other words, in an attempt to justify the invasion of these countries, on-screen discourse describes the West as the saver of the world.

NEGATIVE OTHER-PRESENTATION (SEMANTIC MACROSTRATEGY)

“the categorization of people in ingroups and outgroups, and even the division between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ outgroups, is not value-free, but imbued with ideologically based applications of norms and values” (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 78). As already stated, the Other (Arabs and Muslims) is negatively depicted at all levels.

POSITIVE SELF-PRESENTATION (SEMANTIC MACROSTRATEGY)

The Self (westerners), in the other hand, is positively described at all levels.

NUMBER GAME (RHETORIC, ARGUMENTATION)

Van Dijk states that “Much argument is oriented to enhancing

credibility by moves that emphasize objectivity. Numbers and statistics are the primary means in our culture to persuasively display objectivity” (2000, p. 79). In several scenes, the number of actual and potential victims of terrorism inside and outside U.S. is referred to in order to strengthen the idea of a heartless, brutal Arab/Muslim who kills in cold blood.

POLARIZATION, US-THEM CATEGORIZATION (MEANING)

This refers to the categorical division of people into ingroup (US) and outgroup (THEM). In the context of these films, people are grouped into an ingroup (US) represented by the anti- terrorist heroes (westerners) and an outgroup (THEM) represented by terrorists (Arabs/Muslims).

REASONABLENESS (ARGUMENTATION MOVE)

In comparison to Arabs/Muslims, who are described as mentally and emotionally disturbed, westerners are depicted as reasonable people whose decision are carefully chosen and made.

REPETITION (RHETORIC)

Repetition plays a significant role in emphasizing the positive Self and the negative Other. Repetition takes place at different levels: words, actions, decisions, reactions, etc.

SITUATION DESCRIPTION (MEANING)

Describing a given situation is an important strategy in order to justify certain sensitive decisions. For instance, 9/11 attacks, mimicked in United 93, have been a turning point in the history of U.S. that has largely determined later foreign policy decisions.

VICTIMIZATION (MEANING)

Westerners are depicted as victims of Arab/Muslim terrorists. Scenes

where western civilians are mercilessly killed by terrorists (Navy Seals), scenes where civilian passengers powerlessly say goodbye to their families before surrendering to their fate (United 93) are all meant to depict the ingroup as a victim.

DETOPICALIZATION

De-topicalization is defined as the non-mentioning of otherness and states that the space devoted for otherness (Arabs and Muslims) is diminished in comparison to that devoted to their counterpart (Westerners). Westerners' lives, families, work, legendary deeds, etc., are depicted, whereas those of Arabs and Muslims are not mentioned.

NORM AND VALUE EXPRESSION

The positive Self is also referred to as the one who respects norms and values. In the context of these films, westerners are depicted as responsible citizens and courageous soldiers who care about oppressed people and defend their rights and freedom even at the expense of their own life. In Navy Seals (Teague, 1990), one of the team members Dennis Haysbert (Graham) has left his wedding to join the mission. The same character was later killed by a terrorist, leaving behind a sad woman

NORM AND VALUE VIOLATION

The Other (Arabs and Muslims) are depicted as violating human rights and political freedom. These people are described as unjust, inhuman, savage and heartless.

4.2 Results

The main aim of the current study is to examine the representation of Arabs and Muslims in pre- and post- 9/11 on-screen discourse and check whether 9/11 event has been predicted by pre-9/11 discourse. To seek answers to these questions, we have formulated three main hypotheses: The first states that Hollywood discourse depicts Arabs and Muslims in both pre and post 9/11 in a

negative way. The second states that Western politics considers them as radical terrorists who should be stopped by force. The third states that pre- 9/11 discourse has predicted terrorist attacks against US territory. Two films that took place before and after 9/11 event have been chosen randomly to check the above hypotheses. This included: Navy Seals (Teague, 1990) and United 93 (Greengrass, 2006).

To analyse on-screen discourse, we have adopted van Dijk's model of ideological discourse analysis. The analysis of data revealed that Arabs and Muslims were depicted in a negative way in both pre and post 9/11 on-screen discourse. This was manifested in the overall strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Also, the analysis of political decisions made in these films along their apparent motives showed that western politics exploited media, perhaps still does, to pass down a racist ideology against Arabs and Muslims. A variety of discursive structures, strategies, and moves were implemented towards legitimating what westerners do and delegitimizing what Arabs and Muslims do. Also, checking pre- 9/11 on-screen discourse confirms that at many occasions, Hollywood discourse has expected terrorist attacks on U.S. territory. As such, the three hypotheses have been confirmed.

5. Conclusion

This paper analysed and interpreted Hollywood discourse on terrorism. Its main purpose was to shed light on the representation of Arabs and Muslims in pre- and post- 9/11 on-screen discourse. The analysis of two films using van Dijk's model of Ideological Discourse Analysis has revealed that on-screen discourse is a major medium through which the West manipulates the world and passes its racist political ideology. It is a context where political decisions about U.S and the world are formulated and legitimated. Hollywood discourse does not question the status quo; it decides about and imposes a new one.

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